

American elm has new life at library

Brownell man gives new meaning to the term 'library table'

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HAYS — To make way for the expansion of the Hays Public Library in March 2002, a large American elm tree had to be removed.

Although most saw the expansion as a sign of growth, at least one man saw a loss, for the tree was the last mature one of its kind left in the downtown shopping area.

Justin Herbel approached library director Melanie Miller about creating something from the wood of the removed tree.

"I just kept thinking and thinking about that tree," Herbel said. "I knew there was a project there."

Miller put the Brownell furniture maker in contact with the Friends of the Library who, over the course of several board meetings, agreed to the project.

Herbel said he did not know what it was he wanted to do but that he wanted to do something. He agreed to donate the piece if the library would use it.

"I guess that I am as much as a tree-lover as anything else," Herbel said. "I wanted to make something that would allow people to picture this tree in their mind."

Herbel said that is where the idea of a table came into being.

"A table would be this nice big, flat surface to show the living aspect of this tree."

The tree was covered with burls, large rounded outgrowths that covered the length of the trunk.

"The number of burls was unusual on this tree," Herbel said. "There were just so many of them."

Herbel said trees grow burls for no particular reason; they cannot be traced to either disease or insect damage, they just grow.

Herbel was hoping that the burls would stand out in the piece. He was not disappointed.

"The burls just exploded all over the wood and really made it feel alive," Herbel said, ges-

turing with his hands palm down and fingers spread.

"An elm like that is a particularly hard wood to work," Herbel said. "It's unstable, all twisted and knotted — not the ideal."

After the tree was removed, it was cut into boards that were left to sit and dry for almost a year.

Matching mantel

In that time, Herbel also secured a commission from the library to create a mantel for the fireplace in the Kansas Room.

"Because of how twisted the wood was, it was a long process of clamping and bending and letting (the wood) sit," Herbel said.

He finished the mantel with plenty of time before the library's grand opening Feb. 14.

The table was another story. "I barely made it," Herbel said. "I finished that sucker at 2 a.m. the morning of the opening."

"I'm not sure exactly how long it took to make in actual hours, but in the last two months there were some really late nights."

The table sits majestically in the middle of the Kansas Room.

As with all projects, Herbel said he has used the experience of working with a difficult wood as a medium to further his creative reaches.

"Because wood has its limits as a material, the creativity is in the design," Herbel said. "The design of a piece of work is the creative end."

Herbel said he is not sure if what he does is to be called an art or a craft, and he is not interested in debating the matter. He just creates designs he sees in the wood.

"I do this because I find furniture stores depressing," he said. "The designs they use, the finishes — it just depresses me."

Furniture-making and woodworking is, to Herbel, a craft and art best mastered by hand.

Over his 10-plus years of serious work, he has made several of the tools he uses building furniture including chisels and planers.

"I just get the feeling that when people work with wood any more they don't appreciate the use of hand tools," Herbel said. "I like a balance."